DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 256 CS 204 928

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TITLE Set Them an Example: Sexism in the College Handbooks.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS English Education; Higher Education; *Language Attitudes; *Language Usage; Sex Discrimination; *Sex Fairness; *Sex Stereotypes; *Textbook Bias; *Textbook Content; Textbook Evaluation; Textbook Research; Textbook Standards

ABSTRACT

An examination of eight widely used college English handbooks published since 1974 reveals a range of sexist usage, indicating that authors and editors have not reached a general consensus on which practices they and student writers are to avoid as sexist. Sexism is still manifest in handbooks in such practices as the following: using sexually stereotyped examples, such as depicting professional people with male names or masculine pronouns and assigning female names and feminine pronouns to housewives; employing derogatory remarks about "feminine nature"; using terms such as "girls" for women; advocating masculine generic pronouns; and the authors' uses of masculine generics in discussing or addressing students, teachers, or authors. Of the books studied, only one revision, the seventh edition of Hodges' "Harbrace College Handbook," has been purged of sexism in form and content. Many of its examples have been recast to include women in nonstereotyped roles. (DF)

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SET THEM AN EXAMPLE:

SEXISM IN THE COLLEGE HANDBOOKS

Susan J. Wolfe

Paper presented at the
Thirtieth Annual Meeting of the
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Minneapolis
April 5-7, 1979

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Feminist linguists studying English grammars written in the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries have underscored the cultural assumptions which discussions of "correct usage" and "grammatical gender" reflect. Prior to the nineteenth century, the descriptions of male grammarians determined English usage; they spoke of language in general and English in particular as vehicles used by men for the expression of their thoughts. As Julia Stanley (1978) has pointed out, women were denied access to education until quite recently; grammars were written by men for a male audience, and the use of man, mankind and he undeniably sprang from their awareness of their audience as well as their assumptions of male superiority. Both Bodine (1975) and Stanley (1978) cite Harris' Hermes (1754, p. 54), in which the author asserts that God is of the masculine gender "in as much as the masculine sex is the superior and the more excellent." Stanley goes on to discuss the manner in which the masculine pronoun acceded to a position of preeminence as a replacement for nouns and pronouns of indefinite reference (as, for instance, a student/he, everyone/he, anyone/he): grammarians came to insist that all indefinite pronouns were not only singular but masculine as well. As a result of their formulating a grammatical rule for pronominal replacement which ostensibly regulated number agreement, nineteenth- and twentieth-century grammarians maintain androcentrism in English grammars and in English usage without the necessity for blatant statements of male superiority.

To this date, few grammarians relinquish the historically invalid position that the masculine pronoun has 'traditionally' replaced indefinite nouns and pronouns. Bodine (1975), Stanley (1978), and Stanley

and Wolfe (1978) continue to argue in vain that an 1850 Act of Parliament was necessary to fix the usage felt to be unnatural by many native speakers of English (who, by the way, continue to use they colloquially to replace references to single human beings despite legislative fiat). Trusting, perhaps, in the efficacy of such extralinguistic pressure on those who choose to be arbiters of English usage, members of the National Council of Teachers of English acted. NCTE members evidently have accepted the hypothesis that the use of masculine generics, like other sexist language and sex-role stereotyping, was and is a practice not simply offensive to feminists, but also a practice which perpetuates the notion that women are excluded by implication from most active roles and professions.

In order to help eliminate sexist language and grammar from publications, NCTE has issued and distributed guidelines calling for alternatives to masculine generics in the texts themselves and in the grammatical rules offered for the pronominal replacement of indefinites, as well as for a balanced portrayal of men and women in nonstereotypical roles.

Have these guidelines in fact helped to shape the usage of authors of English grammar texts and the rules they prescribe for our student writers? What do college students find when they open one of the English handbooks routinely chosen by directors of composition or textbook screening committees?

An examination of eight widely-used college English handbooks published since 1974 reveals a range of sexist usage. While it may be objected several of these represent earlier editions which have been reissued, some have been revised. Had sexism in the form of sexually-

biased phrases and examples or masculine generics been assumed offensive to readers or unprofitable to publishers, re-editing would certainly have removed it. Yet authors and editors have not reached a general consensus on which practices they and college writers are to avoid as sexist.

Sexism is still manifest in our handbooks in practices as obvious as sexually-stereotyped examples--in which doctors, lawyers and architects, for instance, have male names and/or are referred to by masculine pronouns, while female names and feminine pronouns are assigned to housewives--and derogatory or condescending remarks about 'feminine nature.' Since such examples are frequently offered as ungrammatical sentences to be corrected by the student, their content may be unwittingly absorbed by her or him. At the very least, she or he is made aware that the author of the handbook, the authority on "good" writing, holds negative views about women. Less obvious are statements regarding the "correctness" of masculine generics, or appeals to "tradition" to maintain their use, or refusals to recommend he or she or they as pronominal replacements for indefinites because the former is "clumsy," "cumbersome" or "awkward" and the latter "inconsistent" with number agreement. Still less obvious are the authors' own uses of masculine generics in replacing indefinites. Perhaps the practice most damaging to a full half of our student writers is that of addressing or discussing the individual student, reader, author as he.

Since authors of handbooks employ sexist language and content in varying degrees, it seems most revealing to demonstrate first the nature of sexism found in the eight texts as a group, before proceeding to the

evaluation of the texts on an individual basis. The books to be reviewed are Crews (1977), Random House Handbook; Hodges and Whitten (1977), Hodges' Harbrace Handbook; Irmscher (1976), The Holt Guide to English; Kierzek and Gibson (1975), The Macmillan Handbook of English, revised by Willson, Jr.; Leggett, Mead, and Charvat (1978), Prentice-Hall Handbook for Writers; Perrin and Corder (1975), Scott, Foresman Handbook of Current English; Watkins, Dillingham, and Martin (1974), Houghton Mifflin Practical English Handbook; Willis (1979), Basic Usage, Vocabulary, and Composition. (Hereafter the books will be referred to by the first author's name.)

All of the authors are careful to avoid pejorative labels for women, yet one would hardly expect these in a composition handbook which counsels students against the use of slang and obscenity in formal writing. Crews, however, explicitly advises his reader against sexist language, including the use of girl, gal, and lady to refer to women:

> 1. Sexism in language has become an especially sensitive topic in recent years. You would be foolish as well as obtuse to include depersonalizing terms like chick, tomato, and broad in your serious essays; and "humorous" use of such words is rarely funny. Less obviously, you should realize that the word equivalent to man is woman, not lady or girl or gal. If William Shakespeare is Shakespeare in your prose, then Emily Dickinson should be Dickinson, not Miss Dickinson or Emily.

> And designations such as _authoress_ and _lady lawyer_ should be avoided for their objectionable hint that genuine, normal authors and lawyers are always men. Even _coed_ should be dropped on these grounds; it insinuates that the higher education of women is an afterthought to the real (male) thing. (p. 112)

Willis, however, less enlightened than Crews, finds references to women as _girls_ unobjectionable. He offers as examples of _good style_:

> 2. A swinger can get a lot of dates, but he often can't get the same girl to date him twice.
>
> The girl wearing the tight sweater is attracting a lot of attention.

while the students are to correct the punctuation of:

> To tell the truth, the only reason why I bought the set of books was, that the salesgirl was so pretty.

Though a sentence in Leggett (p. 88) refers to a recent college graduate who secures a job "as a chorus girl" and another (p. 47) states that "the girl who won the contest is a college freshman," these seem less offensive, perhaps because they are in better taste. Kierzek (p. 333) offers a ten-sentence exercise on uses of the comma which features "a slender red-haired girl" who presents job applicants with application forms as one of them, a male graduate of M.I.T., confides that he and the "girl" had dated when they worked at the same summer resort.

Sex-role stereotyping pervades five of the eight handbooks. In Willis, women appear only in relation to men--as nagging wives, homely spinsters, girls in tight sweaters--or they serve in occupations regarded as traditionally female--nursing and domestic service. The following are typical of his sentences containing female referents:

3. While the rest of the team went to the track for extra practice, Shodlock sneaked off to see his girlfriend, saying, "A miss is as good as a mile." (p. 41)

My Aunt Tillie was very ugly, and it kept her from getting married. (p. 79)

Don Anderson's wife Carol was runner-up in the Miss America contest. (p. 83)

The sailor happiest to go to sea is the one with a nagging wife. (p. 54)

A lone reference to a woman with a high G.P.A. (p. 33) is the sole implication that women are capable of accomplishments beyond physical attractiveness, perfidy, and the necessity for constant male protection and support.

Sex-role stereotyping is subtler but no less pervasive in the examples presented in Crews, Kierzek, Leggett, and Watkins. Each assigns male names and masculine pronouns to persons in positions of responsibility if these involve renown, prestige, or high salaries. In such contexts, he, him, and his replace noun phrases of both definite

and indefinite reference. In Crews, men are labor leaders (p. 137), professional photographers (p. 136), football players (p. 151), mayors (p. 175), naturalists (pp. 152-53), Cabinet members (p. 157), tennis champions (p. 161), baseball pitchers (pp. 168-69), novelists (p. 163). Though there is a paragraph decrying sexist evaluations of women candidates on the basis of their relative attractiveness (pp. 164-65), one on E. M. Forster's deep resentment of "the female sex" (pp. 184-85), and analyses of women authors, these do not fully compensate for the relative absence of women in specific positions of responsibility elsewhere. Women appear largely as housewives and divorcees in Crew's examples; thus, despite his discussion of female students' writing, such students are tacitly directed toward a future of daytime television and/or alimony payments.

4. Betsy was enthused to discover that her relating to men problems, along with all other problems were covered in Dr. Dollar's new book. (p. 124)

She wants alimony to be her largest source of income. (p. 297)

Daytime serial dramatic programs had her undivided concentration. (p. 124)

George listened politely as Susan's lawyer explained why she should have custody of their goldfish and parakeet. (p. 138)

The Macmillan Handbook by Kierzek has comparatively few sample sentences, but there are exercises, many of which consist of ten sentences with a single theme, such as the life of P. T. Barnum (p. 332). Among the exercises is a tale of a "tired and harried executive father" dragged protesting to his "clubwoman" wife's social affairs. Father, who normally "retreats to his study" to escape "a roomful of women," attends a church wedding "to avoid an argument" with his wife (pp. 157-158). Ten pages later, another exercise depicts the trials and tribulations of a male who was obliged to borrow money in order to purchase tickets for a musical concert to which he wished to escort Margie. Having succeeded, he was gratified when Margie "looking very pretty . . . added beauty to an evening of exciting music" (pp. 168-69). Such "stories" are unlikely to hold the attention of today's college students, who are unlikely to be nostalgic for the family situation--comedies which dominated television in the 1950's.

In Watkins and in Leggett, women are housewives, mothers, actresses, or nurses. If a woman learns photography, she takes pictures of her friends (Leggett, p. 112); if she becomes chairwoman or president, the organization she is to head is not specified (Leggett, p. 16). In Watkins, females are sensitive children, attractive ladies, mysterious women, frustrated housewives.

5. The sensitive child knew that the earth was round
   but she thought that she was on the inside of it. (p. 83)

   This patient liked to play house when she was a child,
   but now in adulthood it does not appeal to her. (p. 31)

A gracious, attractive lady (p. 85)

Women have motives and secrets that we men can never fathom. (p. 41)

No matter what the detergent commercials say, no woman is really jubilant at the prospect of mopping her dirty kitchen floor. (p. 33)

By contrast, Leggett's men are managers (p. 72), engineers (p. 70), candidates for political office (p. 64), Presidents of the United States (p. 66), U. S. Senators (p. 78); Watkins' are architects (p. 65), physicians (p. 31), lawyers (p. 69), governors (p. 69), Senators (p. 47), and ambassadors (p. 45).

Irmscher's Holt Guide to English contains no exercises, and those sample sentences which contain female referents are free from sexist bias. This handbook does contain numerous analyses of authors and literary works; women authors are evaluated critically and dispassionately. (See, for instance, his discussion of Katherine Anne Porter's work, pp. 331-32.) If sentences containing references to girls and women are conspicuous by their absence, an occasional example like the following indicates Irmscher's willingness to present women as, for instance, authors and scholars meriting praise.

6. Her book is clearly distinguished--distinguished in the sense that it represents not only a fair reflection of accumulated knowledge but a significant addition to it. (p. 205)

Hodges' Harbrace Handbook represents a deliberate attempt on the part of the women who revised it to portray women in a variety of roles and activities. If women are wives, mothers, waitresses, hostesses, and weight watchers, they are also geologists (p. 226), navy volunteers (p. 131), bandleaders (p. 108), medical doctors (p. 99), bank managers (p. 115). If they are described as beautiful, ugly, "frowsy" or middle-aged" (pp. 110-111), they are also described as "talented," "smart," and "ambitious" (p. 124). Examples follow; they are a few among many comparable:

7. Ed's income is less than his wife's. (p. 232)

Alice Jones, M. D. (p. 99)

Was the letter from Frances Evans, Ph. D., or from F. H. Evans, M. D. (p. 115)

I will interview the Betty Lee who manages the bank. (p. 115)

First she selected a lancet and sterilized it, and then she gave the patient a local anesthetic and lanced the infected flesh. (p. 248)

Moreover, feminist quotations appear as sample sentences (pp. 106 and 121).

Authors of recent handbooks have reacted, often defensively, to feminist charges that masculine pronouns are not true generics, and that he or she, her or him, and himself or herself ought to be used in their stead or sentences recast in the plural. Masculine generics such

as man and mankind are sometimes ignored, since the problem of sexist pronominal replacement is discussed within the context of grammatical errors, as number and person shifts.

Willis (pp. 83-84) pits "Women's Lib" against "custom" and "tradition," insisting that masculine singular pronouns replace indefinites in order to remain "consistent"; he also contends masculines are used as generics "for the sake of simplicity only":

> 8. The second cause of the error is that our language does not have (as many other languages do) a singular personal pronoun to refer to both male and female human beings--only he and she. Thus when writers start with a singular noun such as student, they sometimes feel uneasy about using either he or she or he or she as a continuation. So writers resort to they, which is both masculine and feminine. But in spite of Women's Lib, it is customary in English to use the masculine pronoun he when the sex reference is indefinite. Thus we traditionally write a person . . . he, a student . . . he, a musician . . . he, one . . . he, and so on when the reference can be either to males or females. Consistency calls for such usage.[1]
>
> [1]Another way of saying this is that for the sake of simplicity only, we sometimes use the masculine generic pronouns; they should always be understood to mean either sex.

Watkins (pp. 28-29) mentions his or her in order to dismiss it as "ungainly":

> 8d Such singular antecedents as each, either, neither, one, no one, everyone, someone, anyone, nobody, everybody, somebody, anybody usually call for singular pronouns.
>
> Not one of the hunters felt that he had had a good day.
>
> Everyone put his gun in the rack and went to his room to wash up for dinner.
>
> 9. NOTE: Use his, not the ungainly his or her, in a sentence like the following: Each young rider took his (not his or her) horse successfully over the hurdles.

Irmscher (pp. 220 and 479) explicitly mentions the use of masculine generics as "sexist," but is reluctant to recommend its "clumsy" alternatives he or she or he/she. While either construction "recognizes sexual differences," it creates "stylistic awkwardness."

> 10. Everyone is doing his share.
>
> Note: Because of the absence in the English language of a generic pronoun seemingly less sexist than his to express the idea of "everyone's," writers still continue to use his as a general reference to mankind

or persons of both sexes. The use of he/she and his/her recognizes sexual differences but introduces stylistic awkwardness. An alternative is to rephrase so that the subject invites a plural pronoun:

All of us are doing our share.

All are doing their share.

His suggested rephrasings are unobjectionable; less so is his unfounded appeal to the "traditional" use of the masculine generics, he/him/his and man (pp. 479 and 482):

11. He and his have traditionally been used in a generic sense to refer to both males and females. The change of women's status during the 1970s has focused attention on a usage that seems to deprive women of equal status by including them anonymously with the other sex. As a result, many writers and speakers now consciously try to avoid the generic he. The common way to solve the problem is to use he or she. This is unmistakable in meaning, but represents a clumsy construction that detracts from the total meaning by calling attention to itself. In some contexts it even produces unintended humor.

man, person The use of man to refer to "a human being of either sex" pervades the English language. In fact, woman derives from the Old English word wifman,

meaning literally "a female human being." The change of women's status during the 1970s has focused attention on words that seem to mention only males in a preferred way when both men and women are included. Thus, chairperson or simply chair (a use of synecdoche) is now commonly substituted for chairman to refer to either sex. Other uses such as salesperson, sportsperson, maintenance person, or an expression like to a person instead of to a man are likely to find favor, although it it questionable whether words like foreperson, freshperson, and woperson ever will. The substitution of person for man in initial and medial positions seems especially unlikely when we consider examples like personhole, personhour, personpower, sportspersonship, statespersonship, and a verb like personhandle. Words of this variety introduce an element of absurdity. The changes that are occurring and being accepted, however, give us an opportunity to observe language in action.

Any discussion of man which merely points to its historical status as a generic is simply misleading: man now "seems to mention only males in a preferred way" because English lost male-specific nouns such as wer in the course of its development. Had man remained a true generic and wer been retained, no one would recommend compounds such as woperson and freshperson. Yet it seems illogical to assume that a language which

has incorporated into its lexicon burglarize and fisherman in lieu of the "less awkward" burgle and fisher would reject -person compounds on stylistic grounds alone. (pp. 262-64)

Kierzek accepts his or her as a replacement for antecedents of general or indefinite reference, while acknowledging that it is "still correct" to use the masculine pronoun; he or she, his or her, him or her are simply "substitutes":

> When one is the antecedent, American usage prefers he and his (or he or she, his or her) to the repetition of one, which is regarded as too formal.
>
> 12. Ordinarily one of the masculine pronouns, he, his, him, is used to refer to one of these "group taken individually" words. He or she, his or her, him or her are now generally accepted as substitutes.
>
> EXAMPLES
>
> Every person in the audience was requested to put his [or his or her] name to the petition.
>
> It has also been common and correct to use one of the masculine pronouns when the antecedent of the pronoun gives no indication of gender but might refer to either a man or a woman.
>
> EXAMPLES
>
> Every author is responsible for proofreading his book.
>
> The good cook does not wash his own dishes.
>
> To follow this practice is still correct; however,

it is also correct (and sometimes desirable) to acknowledge both genders in the pronoun.

EXAMPLES

The writer must make up his or her mind on the question.

What secretary would let the boss dictate to him or her during the lunch break?

Kierzek, like Irmscher and Watkins suggests that such instructions are awkward if overused, and suggests alternatives:

> 13. The average homeowner hasn't a moment to call his or her own; he or she spends his or her free moments struggling to keep his or her private castle from decaying until it is offensive to his or her neighbors.
>
> The last example shows the awkwardness of sustaining the doubled pronoun construction throughout frequent references. When the he and she's begin to pile up and overwhelm everything else in a sentence or paragraph, the awkwardness can be overcome by using a plural construction. "Average homeowners haven't a moment to call their own; they spend their free moments . . . to keep their . . ." It may sometimes be best to recast the whole to avoid the need for pronouns altogether, (p. 263)

Leggett (pp. 64-65) too insists that masculine pronouns have been used "historically . . . to refer to such antecedents as me, none, everybody, and similar pronouns that designate either male or female," but suggests ways to recast sentences to avoid "the common gender use of he:

> 14. Historically he (him, his) has been used to refer to such antecedents as one, none, everybody, and similar indefinite pronouns that designate either male or female. This "common gender" use of the masculine pronouns has been widely criticized in recent years. Some critics have suggested coining new pronouns such as himmer, which would refer to both men and women. Others have urged the regular use of he or she (him or her, his or hers) when the reference is general. But language strongly resists such changes as the first, and many writers and speakers find the second too awkward for regular use. The growing practice of writers who wish to avoid the common gender use of he (him, his) is to cast their sentences in the plural, or to rework their sentences to avoid the problem. Note the following.
>
> A careful writer will recast his sentences.
> A careful writer will recast his or her sentences.
> Careful writers will recast their sentences.

Perrin (pp. 102-03), after a nod in the direction of custom, is bold enough to predict that he or she or they may become common replacements for antecedents which refer to persons of either sex:

15. The masculine pronoun (he, him, his) has customarily been used when referring to a noun or pronoun that includes persons of both sexes (student, teacher, clerk, everyone, anyone, somebody):

    Each entering freshman is required to report promptly for his scheduled physical examination.

    Everyone who is eligible to vote should make certain that he has registered before the deadline.

    There is no particular reason why the masculine pronoun should be used in such situations. It has for a long time been a customary practice. It is more convenient and less cumbersome to use a single pronoun than it is to use two pronouns to signify both sexes:

    Everyone who is eligible to vote should make certain that he or she has registered before the deadline.

    It seems likely (if predictions aren't out of place in a handbook) that the use of both masculine and feminine pronouns will become more common, or plural constructions used more frequently:

    Every student who wishes to can get his or her textbooks at the University Store immediately

after registration.

Crews (p. 113) implies that those who find generic man and he/him/his offensive are not only rash, and uneducated, but inconsiderate of our readers, thereby undermining the credibility of a feminist or profeminist English instructor in her or his own classroom:

> 16. Are mankind, man-made, and chairman offensive? As of now, most educated users of the language, male and female, would say no; but opinion is shifting. You can substitute humanity for mankind, and artificial for man-made, without attracting notice; but chairperson, though it is rapidly becoming common, will still bother some readers. Many people find person-suffixed words clumsy and self-conscious. Before using one, see if you can't find a truly neutral alternative: not chairperson but head, not congressperson but representative, not policeperson but officer, not weatherperson but meteorologist.
>
> The sorest of all issues in contemporary usage is that of the so-called common gender. Which pronouns should be used when an indefinite person, a "one," is being discussed? Traditionally, that indefinite person has been "male": he, his, him, as in A taxpayer must check his return carefully. For the centuries in which this practice went unchallenged, the masculine pronouns in such sentences

were understood to designate, not actual men, but people of either sex. Today, however, many readers find those words an offensive reminder of second-class citizenship for women. Remedies that have been proposed range from using he or she (or she or he) for the common gender, to treating singular common words as plural (A taxpayer must check their return), to combining masculine and feminine pronouns in forms like s/he, to adopting radically new common forms such as tey, tem, and ter.

. . . .

My view is that it's a bad bargain to be forever proving your advanced attitude at the expense of your reader's concentration and ease. Your instructor, however, may see the matter differently.

After dismissing the use of he or she as "cumbersome and monotonous," of they as an apparent "blunder," and of innovative pronominal terms as "disconcerting," Crews offers four suggestions of his own:

17. 1. Use she wherever the indefinite person is more likely to be female than male.
    2. Use an occasional he or she to indicate your awareness that the common-gender he has unfair implications.
    3. Avoid the singular wherever your meaning isn't affected: Taxpayers must check their returns.

4. Omit the pronoun altogether when it isn't essential:
not Everyone needs his vacation but Everyone needs
a vacation.

The first counsels the student writer to engage in sex-role stereotyping: e.g., replace nurse with she, doctor with he. The second advises him or her to indulge in lip-service liberalism.

Only in Hodges are all alternatives presented without editorial comment, appeals to tradition, or style, or self-righteous attacks on those who would sacrifice linguistic purity and reader convenience merely to achieve a semblance of equality for women.

18. As a rule use a singular pronoun to refer to such antecedents as each, either, neither, one, anyone, everybody, a person, and so one.
Each of these companies had its books audited.
[Not their]
One has to live with oneself. [Not themselves]
Usage varies regarding the choice of pronoun referring to such antecedents as everyone or a person when the meaning includes both sexes or either sex:
A person needs to see his dentist twice a year.
[or his or her]
Every man and women shows his/her essence by reaction to the soil. --Robert S. DeRopp
So everybody gets married--unmarried--and married,

but they're all married to somebody most of the time. --Margaret Mead

In fact, the fear of growing old is so great that every aged person is an insult and a threat to the society. They remind us of our own death. . . . --Sharon Curtin

While Hodges' Harbrace College Handbook does not "correct" masculine generics, one exercise on the page facing the paragraph just quoted contains a sentence which suggests that he/him/his are not true generics:

19. A number of people, such as Kate Swift and Warren Farrell, (has, have) offered (his, her and his, their) suggestions for a "human" singular pronoun, like te for he or she to refer to the antecedent a person. (p. 59)

In sum, while none of these authors except perhaps Hodges and Whitten is truly comfortable with NCTE's guidelines for nonsexist language, each presents the notions of sexism in language or "pronominal agreement" in accord with his or her own views on the role of writing and of teaching composition, but these views are conditioned in part by his or her views on the appropriate roles for the sexes. Indeed the examples offered to the students by these authors suggest the audience to which each believes he/she speaks.

Willis does not simply assign the notion that language may be

sexist to "Women's Libbers"; he also refers to women as girls, presents men and women in stereotypical roles, and uses generic he in his own writing. Leggett's Prentice-Hall Handbook is somewhat less consistent in its sexism: adult females are girls, women are stereotyped, and masculine generics are used by the author, although he notes that their use "has been widely criticised in recent years." Kierzek uses masculine generics, claiming they are "still correct," but offers he or she, his or her, and him or her "as substitutes," and his sexist protrayals are limited to several exercises which are ineffective period pieces. Watkins places men and women in stereotypical roles and insists on the use of masculine generics, for he offers no alternatives. Both Crews and Perrin address the student as "you"; both acknowledge that masculine generics offend the sensibilities of many readers. Yet both use masculine generics in their own writing when referring to singular nouns of indefinite reference, and Crews' sentences reveal conservative notions about male and female roles as well. Irmscher points to some of the difficulties facing those of us seeking viable alternatives for masculine generics, acknowledging that the use of he, him and his is "seemingly . . . sexist." Elsewhere (pp1 156-57), however, he mentions as pronouns to be used by authors for stylistic purposes I, we, one, you and "he as disguised I." Presumably we are to regard he as generic or assume all authors to be male. Only Mary Whitten's revision of Hodges' Harbrace Handbook has been purged of sexism in form and content; it is as though she has edited the text with this intent, for many of the examples from the seventh edition have been recast to include women agents in nonstereotyped roles.

Obviously, we do not choose composition handbooks solely on the basis of their attitudes toward the sexes. I do not mean to suggest that this should be our principal concern. But the assumption that we are simply teachers of writing form, logical argumentation, and grammar is untenable. Authors, even of handbooks, write about something; they form attitudes, they choose topics. Perhaps the time has come for those of us concerned with sexism in the culture to monitor the portrayals of women our textbooks offer our students, whether in the form of sexist examples or faulty arguments about masculine pronouns and agreement.

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